“I’m a Republican, but Please Don’t Tell: An Application of Spiral of Silence Theory to Perceptions of Classroom Climate”

Summary

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships between political affiliation and perceptions of political silencing in university classrooms in reference to the Spiral of Silence Theory adapted by Noelle-Neumann. The focus of this research documented political opinions expressed by students and the influence of classroom communication on the perceptions of political tolerance in the classroom.

According to the Spiral of Silence Theory, people will be unwilling to publicly express their opinion if they believe they are a part of the minority and conversely, they will be more vocal if they believe they are a part of the majority. The fear of being rejected by others causes the individual to reserve any personal assessment and become more marginalized. Demographics like race, class, and gender are all strong influencers in the way students perceive one another, and thus communicate freely in the classroom. . In regards to this study, the university classroom is the perfect environment to observe how diversity affects students’ willingness to express their beliefs. Professors must be wary of how perceptions of silencing and their reactions influence student communication and learning. When the subject of politics is addressed in the classroom, are students willing to express their Democrat or Republican affiliations without any fear of being judged by their peers?

H1a: Student perceptions of political silencing are positively related to

student perceptions of perceived differences in student – instructor political

affiliation.

H1b: Student perceptions of political silencing are positively related to

student perceptions of perceived differences in student – instructor ideological

affiliation.

H2a: Perceived classroom climate is positively related to perceived student-instructor similarity in political affiliation.

H2b: Perceived classroom climate is positively related to perceived student-instructor similarity in ideological affiliation.

H3: Student perceptions of political silencing predict low levels of perceived classroom climate.

Research Question: Are there significant differences between Republican and Democrat students in perceptions of political silencing?

For this study, participants were recruited from a communications course enrolled at large university located in the Midwest. Some very important demographic information had to be documented before the study could take place. Out of all the anonymous participants, 376 at least 18 years of age, 245 were female, 334 students were non-Hispanic, 17 African American, 12 Asian, 7 multi-racial, 4 Spanish, and 3 Native American. First, the participants were asked to report their overall knowledge of politics, with the majority of the group stating they were someone knowledgeable. Most importantly, party identification was 48% Republican and 37% Democrat. Students were then instructed to complete a survey where questions “focused on political silencing, perceptions of connected classroom climate, and perceptions of the climate created by the instructor, as well as demographic questions.” Participants were instructed to recall the last discussion-based course they were enrolled in that covered current events and politics. Participants were then asked to state their level of agreement with 11 statements using a scale of 1 meaning strongly agree to 5 meaning strongly disagree. “For example, participants were asked their level of agreement with the following statement: My instructor acknowledges my point of view, even if s/he does not specifically call on me.”

The results proved that political party affiliation and ideological differences between the student participant and instructor do lead to great perceptions of political silencing meaning that when the student is aware of a conflicting views it is highly likely that the student will engage in silencing. On the other hand, results on the relationship between differences between Republican and Democrat students in perceptions of political silencing were quite interesting. The study showed participants of either party affiliation experienced the same ability to voice their ideas in the classroom. There was not significant evidence to show that either political side perceived any silencing, which is very encouraging. There was concern that the liberals would silence the Republicans, but this was not the case. Overall, political and ideological identification does influence perceptions of student interaction in the classroom, but there are numerous variables affecting the climate.

The Spiral of Silence theory can be prevalent in the academic world as well as the political spectrum because many individuals might fear voicing their opinions or standing up for what they believe is right, but this study proved there was not significant evidence to conclude that theory. Children must be encouraged to speak their mind regardless of any social stigma or wariness in order to create a society that is not afraid to speak out and this has a lot to do with the overall climate of the classroom. We see that at the university level political silencing is not a problem and students are not afraid to voice their opinion when there are known differences in though. This study provided the evidence necessary to take a clear look at how even university students who take political positions are able to voice that stance because the instructor provides the classroom climate with a positive and neutral atmosphere. It is very important for classroom instructors to respect their student’s right to their own opinion and maintain the classroom environment so that no one feels the affects of the spiral of silence.